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Article:

How to Write a Horror Film: *The Awakening* (2011) and the British Film Industry

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Abstract

This article reveals how screenwriter Stephen Volk's idea for a sequel to *The Innocents* (1961, Jack Clayton) became, over the course of fifteen years, the British horror film *The Awakening* (2011, Nick Murphy). It examines practitioner interviews in order reflect upon creative labour in the British film industry, while also re-orientating the analysis of British horror film to the practices of pre-production. The research reveals that female protagonist Florence Cathcart was a major problem for the project and demonstrates how the Florence character changed throughout the development process. Repeatedly rewritten and ultimately tamed by successive male personnel, her character reveals persistent, problematic perceptions of gender in British horror filmmaking.

Keywords

British cinema, horror film, *The Awakening*, screenwriting, script development, gender

In the opening scene of *The Awakening* (2011), Florence Cathcart (Rebecca Hall) takes part in a séance at a private house. The sitters are placed at a table and arranged in a long line. They clutch at physical manifestations of their memories: a blonde lock of hair tied in black ribbon, a necklace, and, for Florence, a photograph of Charles, her soldier boyfriend, now deceased. A medium shuffles into the room, shrouded in a black veil. A rook caws, its throat is slit and

the corpse is placed in a giant bell jar in front of the mute medium. One of the sitters peers into the glass and sees the reflection of her dead daughter. The grieving woman cries out, lunging towards the reflection, but Florence leaps from her chair and accosts the reflected 'apparition', a small boy in a white dress. The curtains are ripped open and the light floods in. The heartbroken sitters are led away and their fantasies of communication with loved ones destroyed. Florence oversees the arrest of the fraudulent spiritualists and is then left in the room, her purpose achieved.

The opening sequence of *The Awakening* fascinates me. It raises so many questions: the film, set in 1921 when the strictures of patriarchal subservience were binding, nonetheless features a young woman utterly in control of the scene. Who is she? Why is she debunking séances? Where does her power come from? In addition, it offers a number of motifs common to Victorian-era horror, including a cluttered parlour, a séance, grieving sitters and a mysterious medium. Yet this film is set in the aftermath of World War I, contains (unusual) occult elements such as blood sacrifice, the sitters are not in a circle and the medium is unmasked as an old man in female clothing. This feels odd, and the intrigue increases when I discover that Stephen Volk, BAFTA-award winning writer of *The Midwinter of the Spirit* (2015, ITV), *Afterlife* (2005 – 2006, Clerkenwell Films / ITV), *Ghostwatch* (1992, BBC) and *Gothic* (1986, Ken Russell), is credited as the co-writer. Volk's oeuvre has always demonstrated a strong awareness and respect for traditional storytelling techniques relating to the supernatural and paranormal. When I interviewed Volk, he revealed that the original screenplay was set in the Victorian period and began with a traditional séance, but co-writer and director Nick Murphy altered it. Murphy is a BAFTA-award winning director, known for *The Last Kingdom* (2015, Carnival / BBC), *Prey* (2014, Red / ITV) and Iraq War mini-series *Occupation* (2009, ARTE / Kudos / BBC). When I then interviewed Murphy, he explained that he rewrote Volk's script, he wasn't a horror fan and the occult elements were added for

fun. He wanted the audience to think the film was delivering 'familiar, Victorian' horrors, to 'bring people down that certain road and then say *whak whak*. Sorry, it's not going to be like that'.[1]

Craig Batty defines the stages of screen production as 'the conceptualisation, development, production and reception of a screen work'.[2] This article focuses on the first two in order to explore a fundamental tension in *The Awakening*'s screenplay development. Development is used in accordance with Peter Bloore's definition, the 'creative and industrial collaborative process' through which a story becomes a script that 'is then repeatedly rewritten to reach a stage when it is attractive to a suitable director, actors and relevant film production funders; so that enough money can be raised to get the film made'.[3] It is apparent that there is a disjunction between Volk's original vision for the film, drawn on his longstanding writing and research in the horror genre, and Murphy's desire to offer something new and unexpected to the audience. In order to productively explore this further - and influenced by Brett Mills and Sarah Ralph's interviews with British television comedy producers, and Sherry B. Ortner's ethnographic work on American independent cinema - I have interviewed a range of writers, producers, directors and actors involved in the story development of *The Awakening*.[4] Raw interview material, garnered from the memories of those involved, is then used to generate the story of film development.

This form of qualitative research is not without risks, however; these methodological issues must be acknowledged. As John F. Schostak cautions, the interview is 'a place where views may clash, deceive, seduce, enchant… It is as much about seeing a world – mine, yours, ours, theirs – as about hearing accounts, opinions, arguments, reasons, declarations: words with views into different worlds.[5] Similarly, Linda Ruth Williams notes, 'interviews generate material that is both true and false, skewed by memory or wish fulfilment, interpretative and richly interpretable'.[6] The point Williams makes around memory is an

important one. Annette Kuhn argues that 'telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves', and in this raw material 'narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account – whether forgotten or repressed – as by what is actually told'.[7] As this article will reveal, individual memories of key events are often in conflict, shaped by the differing importance of events to an individual, or by the unequal power relations prevalent in industry. In turn, attempts to confirm the apparent 'facts' that dominate one account and are absent in another can be a sensitive process for interviewer and interviewee alike. My findings are presented with the knowledge that not only is memory subjective, but that everyone interviewed for this project is, in one form or another, a professional storyteller. As Joshua Gamson notes in his work on Hollywood creatives, 'the livelihood of many of these industry professionals rests largely on the shaping of public images and public stories', and my interviewees are sufficiently skilled that – should they wish – they have the potential to subtly shape the retelling of their memories to suit their interpretation of events.[8]

Using personal interviews as a basis for generation of academic historical material is thus a delicate task, but a productive one nonetheless. It is perhaps most valuable when understood in terms of Kuhn's interpretation of 'memory work', 'a method and practice of unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretative devices of culture don't quite work'.[9] In film studies, the analysis of the creative and aesthetic aspects of film usually relies upon textual interpretation of the finished film, to what Ian W. MacDonald refers to as 'the screen work'.[10] Here we have an opportunity to explore how creativity is managed during pre-production, to unearth the 'untold story' of the film's development, uncovering an element of horror film's industrial process not debated elsewhere.

As such, this research thematically analyses practitioner interviews in order reflect upon creative labour in the British film industry. The interviews are used to re-orientate the analysis of British horror film to the practices of pre-production. In 'Disentangling the Screen Idea' MacDonald explains 'there are some things the screenplay is not: it is not a finished piece of work . . . it is not normally, by the start of shooting, the work of only one person, despite what it says on the cover', and most importantly 'at no point in its development can the screenplay be said to truly reflect the final screenwork'.[11] This article takes this proposition further: there is no single document that can be fairly described as *the* screenplay; rather it is bricolage, composed of multiple drafts, voices and creative ideas. Understanding this is crucial to reforming our usual ideas around authorship and ownership of story ideas. As such, my focus is screenwriting and script development, and the aim is to unpack the collaborative writing process, where the 'collaboration' is often anything but, with writers taken off drafts, drafts written by others without credit, disagreements over the advice given to writers, rewrites undertaken without the original writer's knowledge, and the contribution of actors to developing character. This illuminates not only the importance of understanding development as a powerful element of filmmaking, but also the problem of analysing the screenwork as emblematic of the (credited) writer's concerns and preoccupations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *The Awakening* elucidates a little-examined model of horror filmmaking, one with a female sensibility at its heart. For a generation of male writers, Hammer films have been the case study of a choice, films which according to Sarah Street, feature 'independent women' as 'the chief targets . . . they are punished and murdered for their sins'.[12] This is problematic, and as I have argued elsewhere, 'there are gendered implications arising from the decisions made by male writers as they select, categorise and write our horror film histories'.[13] The analysis of *The Awakening* is part of a

concerted shift to academic analysis of horror films that feature strong female protagonists; characters with a concerted draw for female audiences.

While this seems an elementary point, it has not been the case in academia. As Tim Snelson notes, 'following a tradition of psychoanalytically informed feminist film theory', most accounts (such as those inspired by Robin Wood, Linda Williams, Barbara Creed and Carol Clover) 'rely on the assertion that the horror spectator is typically positioned as male and that the genre is founded on the subjugation of women', explaining that female horror spectatorship is considered 'at best a displeasurable and at worst an untenable textual position'.[14] In more recent years, a new wave of horror scholarship has unearthed more empirically grounded methodologies that explore film financing, censorship, distribution, exhibition, reception and digital technologies, with notable contributions from Kate Egan, Russ Hunter, Johnny Walker and Jamie Sexton.[15] While none of these explores the creative process, one can often find practitioner interviews in books that target general fans of horror. There are major limitations to these approaches, however. Forshaw's British Gothic Cinema has an appendix of interviews, including discussions with actress Ingrid Pitt and Simon Oakes, President and CEO of Hammer Films. Blithe Q&As or nostalgic first-person monologues, the interviews are predominantly anecdotal or delivered with very broad strokes – e.g., Oakes describing Hammer as 'a labour of love', and that the 'challenge' for Hammer is 'very stimulating'.[16] Similarly, while David Pirie's A New Heritage of Horror offers engaging production histories of British horror films, his approach is descriptive, and involves reciting factual material without reflection.[17] Similarly, Wayne Kinsey's work on Hammer Films is grounded in chummy reminiscence, descriptive rather than analytical.[18]

To be sure, there have been a few academic works that examine horror and screenwriting. Blake and Bailey's Writing the Horror Movie is a how-to guide for aspiring writers, but, as I have noted elsewhere, it lacks critical analysis, contains many factual errors,

and does not analyse development documents – nor even screenplays – taking the screenwork as the basis for dispensing genre wisdom.[19] Although Shaun Kimber's 'Horror Screenwriting: Blending Theory with Practice' features in Craig Batty's academic collection, it also focuses on advice for aspiring writers, proposing 'six intersecting areas' for prospective horror writers to consider, including 'conducting research into screen horror'.[20]

In sum, none of the hitherto efforts takes an academic, critical approach to horror screenwriting and development, and the recent, largely celebratory efforts tend to obscure the clear and problematic gender scenarios. Therein lies a key part of this article's intervention. The development process of *The Awakening* will reveal, time and time again, that the Florence character was a major problem for the people involved with this project. In an early treatment, Volk describes her as 'an opinionated, strong-willed, obsessive, self-taught woman in the gentlemen's club domain of Victorian scientific exploration'.[21] Yet Murphy ruefully explains that film audiences 'won't forgive a know-all woman . . . it's this great leader or a bossyboots, it's that sexism flip'. Drawing together the interviews, the focus on development and the creation of the female protagonist, the article then explores how a series of (almost exclusively male) personnel rewrote the Florence character in the course of pre-production. Revealing industry creatives' preconceptions about audience tastes and expectations, I will make conclusions about what the *Awakening* story tells us about how female characters are written in British horror film scripts.

Act One: From Flora to Florence

In 1989 Susan Benn set up the Performing Arts Labs in Kent, originally designed for writers in theatre, film and opera. Producer Colin Vaines was hired as Lab Director in 1993, and in 1994 he returned to the role, inviting Volk as a Lab Mentor. Each evening, a mentor would screen a film of their choice and Volk chose *The Innocents* (1961, Jack Clayton), an

adaptation of Henry James' ghostly novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Watching with the students, Volk was struck by the ending of Act Two, when Flora is sent away. He asked himself, 'what happened to this little girl? What was she like when she grew up?'.[22] Vaines and Volk discussed the idea and the latter produced a film treatment, set in the 1880s. Volk explains that the adult Flora has 'semi-forgotten the events at Bly', 'has become a very rational ghost hunter' and is hired to investigate a haunting at a boys' school, revealed to be Bly. Upon arriving at the school, she discovers that the haunting relates to the events of her childhood.

Between 1996 and 1997, Vaines and Volk worked on a few treatments with various titles, including *Corruption* and *Bly*. However Vaines was unable to generate interest in the United Kingdom or United States, and the project went quiet. The lack of interest in the project throughout the late 1990s is reflective of the horror production in Britain during this period. Street explains that horror was a significant British genre until the mid-1970s, when it entered 'a period of stagnation and decline, along with the rest of British film production'.[23] This is mirrored by David Pirie's statistics: about 114 horror films were made in Britain in the 1970s, in the 1980s there were around 21, and by the 1990s, 'the number is low teens and even that includes some very limited releases'.[24] However, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a significant cultural shift in both perceptions of horror and British independent film production. Lindsey Decker has pointed out how in 1999 the BBFC relaxed its censorship of horror films, and in 2000 Film4 established its Frightfest festival; while in 2000 the New Labour government also established the UK Film Council, a funding body that Lisa W. Kelly describes as 'both an advocate for the film industry and a distributor of public funding for film production'.[25] Decker describes the following period as 'the post-2000 British horror resurgence', marked by 'a precipitous rise in the production, distribution and

exhibition of British horror films', exemplified by *28 Days Later* (2002, Danny Boyle), *Deathwatch* (2002, Michael J. Bassett) and *Dog Soldiers* (2003, Neil Marshall).[26]

According to Volk, in 2003 his agent sent the treatment to BBC Films. Joe Oppenheimer, then part of David Thompson's development team at BBC Films, and now a Commissioning Executive, remembers slightly differently, explaining that Volk had been called in to discuss whether *Ghostwatch* could be remade as a feature film. The decision was no, but in the ensuing conversation about ghost stories, Volk pitched *The Interpretation of Ghosts.* Perhaps responding to market trends, BBC Films showed interest, notably at a time when horror was rediscovered as a genre that was 'affordable and travels well', with 'indigenous and global market potential'.[27] As a result of this meeting, Vaines received what he described as 'a standard lawyer letter' asking Vaines to renounce his rights to the story.[28] Vaines signed, but 'as it went on in the industry I remember thinking, I set something up in the story with Stephen . . . . But I must have been feeling very benign at the time'. Later in the article we will come to the concept of 'disinvestment and pride' in relation to screenwriters and their work, but we can see here how other associated creative-related roles, such as producer, may be required to perform their own version of this behaviour.

Volk recalls his first conversation with BBC Films as disheartening. He recollects them saying, 'we can't make this the sequel to *The Turn of the Screw* because we can't depend on the audience having seen it to like it'. Oppenheimer refutes this precise wording, explaining that 'I loved the fact that [*The Innocents*] was the inspiration' but it would've been a 'red rag to every critic out there' to badge it as a sequel.[29] Rather, he attempts to refine Volk's statement, 'you don't need to compare the two for the audience. If they find that link, great, otherwise no. So no, I don't think it could be as crude as "oh well no-one would have seen it so why bother?" I just think . . . it does nothing but harm [to explicitly refer to the source text]'. These differing responses reveal why it is important to obtain multiple

interviews and to locate the findings within the framework of memory. History builds upon contradictory memories, where the differing positions of the interviewees – freelance screenwriter, development executive – inflect the version of the story being told. As Kuhn argues in relation to a family photograph, the 'protagonists might tell a different tale, or change their own story at every retelling . . . . In each re-enactment, each re-staging . . . details get added and dropped, the story fleshes out, new connections are made'.[30]

Volk remembers his source material being ousted for audience reasons; Oppenheimer remembers attempting to refine the approach to avoid potential critical hostility. In either case, BBC Films requested a new backstory, and in December 2003 Volk produced a seven-page treatment, entitled *The Interpretation of Ghosts*. As with the original treatment, Florence undertakes a ghost-hunting job at a boy's school. She leaves her husband in London and takes old school friend Beatrice with her. Lesbian sexuality is at the forefront of the script. There are strong suggestions that Florence may be Beatrice's lover, and their sexual relationship is contrasted with the repressive male environment of the school: 'two women in buttoned-up black Victorian dresses enter the musk of latent adolescent sexuality. Boys whispering, uptight, insecure. Even the nude female statues are covered up by dust sheets'.[31] Lesbian sexuality is then explored in relation to child corruption, drawing parallels with *The Turn of the Screw*. Florence examines an old schoolbook with the name 'Katy' scrawled on the front. Inside 'is child-like writing, then obscene sexual drawings'. Florence's investigation reveal that twenty years earlier, seven year old Katy developed an 'unhealthy friendship' with the kitchen maid Agatha. As punishment, the servant men raped and tortured Agatha; when she died her corpse was thrown in the lake. Katy was sent away, and 'made to forget'. The film culminates in Florence realising *she* is Katy and drowning herself in the lake; the treatment concludes tragically, 'Florence and Agatha: united in death at last'.[32]

BBC Films commissioned a full-length script, and Volk worked with Ed Rubin and Oppenheimer to develop it. According to Paul Wells, editorial input in development has two main aspects (which can run in parallel): first, the creative choices the writer imposes upon themselves, and second, seen as 'fundamental to the collaborative screen production process', when 'an external agent intervenes, either in the service of directing the writer or creator to change or re-draft material, or directly rewriting the material themselves'. [33] I am most interested in here how Rubin and Oppenheimer, as 'external agents', guided Volk through redrafts that refine and refocus the purpose of the story, particularly in relation to the conclusion of Florence's character journey. By December 2005, several drafts of *The Interpretation of Ghosts* had been completed, notably with a new ending in which Florence survives, but at a price. Florence's husband arrives at the school in time to save her from drowning, and takes her back to London. In the chilling, final scenes, Florence hosts a tea party. She is 'smiling . . . but when she turns her head, we see the shocking scars of psychosurgery. . . . Livid, stitches still fresh, raw . . . her smile, we realise, is fixed. And her eyes are as blank and dead as a piece of slate'. [34]

At this stage the story has significantly shifted from Volk's original idea: *The Innocents* sequel is rejected and Florence has neither a (potential) lesbian relationship nor does she kill herself. Instead the script has tamed her professional and sexual proclivities: the homosexual ghost hunter erased and replaced with a compliant, domesticated wife. This demonstrates Volk's indictment of not only patriarchal oppression of female sexuality in Victorian society, but also the expectation in mainstream narrative storytelling that Florence must be rescued and 'put right'. At this point, BBC Films decided the script was ready for dissemination to directors and financiers, a crucial turning point in the development process. The following section of this article will explore what happens when the new, more powerful

voices of directors channel into pre-production, how their own interpretations reshape the script and the growing problem of the intellectual Florence's wants and needs.

Act Two: The Quest for a Director

BBC Films began to look for a director for *The Interpretation of Ghosts* in early 2006. Volk had meetings and discussions with a number of directors, including Nicholas Winding Refn. Although they did not meet with success, this is not unusual. As Rubin explains, 'four to five years from starting to - if it's lucky enough - to get into production is pretty normal'.[35] Nevertheless, in June 2007 Volk had a meeting with BBC Films to discuss why directors were not responding to the script. Looking at the draft screenplay from 2005, the characterisation of Florence is a potential issue. While she has many essential traits for a strong protagonist – great strength of will, extremely active and decisive, not to mention a fascinating darkness – she lacks empathy and any vulnerability for the first two acts of the film. It is only when she discovers the truth of her childhood and the mystery of Bly at the end of Act Two that her real hopes and fears are revealed. For the majority of the film, she is brusque to the point of being permanently offensive, and shows complete disinterest in the perspectives of other people. For example, when the teacher first approaches her about investigating the boys' school, and outlines the terrible death of a young boy at the school, she coolly suggests he call the police. When the reader / audience feels a twinge of sadness in what is described, and the protagonist does not, it creates an emotional disconnect.

It is important to emphasise that this reading is not gendered. Florence should not be damned here for not showing mothering, caring traits that are problematically attributed to women. The need is broader: the expectation of empathetic traits in the protagonist, regardless of her or his sex. No matter how dark, complicated or despicable the lead character is, there needs to be at least one element of that character that the audience can relate to; one aspect of

the personality that makes the audience care what happens to them. In the 2005 screenplay, Florence's emotional range is stunted: musing over the supernatural terrors she experiences, she concludes that 'there was nothing veridical in my experience last night. Nothing measurable. It was purely subjective and purely worthless'.[36] There is no sense that Florence is putting up a 'front' either, which – if we felt that she was performing this role to help her cope with life – could make her more sympathetic. Volk explains that at this stage Florence is 'the Sherlock Holmes character'. The Holmesian character as protagonist and narrator is perhaps one reason that potential directors struggled with the script. The audience sees the world from Florence's point of view, and it is a cold and lonely place. In Conan Doyle's stories, the Holmes' clinical iciness is tempered with Watson's narration and perspective, the sidekick offering a more humane interpretation of proceedings.

Following the meeting, Volk sent notes to BBC Films, which summarise 'you believe it is basically a problem about the character / characterisation of Florence Cathcart'. Notably, Oppenheimer remembers differently. There were attempts to attract the interest of Andrea Arnold and Thomas Alfredson, amongst others, and Oppenheimer 'found mostly people really liked the script and it was more about finding people . . . we were excited by'. Indeed, he does not 'remember anyone turning down the script on [the basis of Florence], no'. Such contradictions among the players raise issues for my retelling of the *Awakening* production history. I was unable to explore the BBC Films archives. Oppenheimer explains that he 'found very few written notes, [which is] because of archiving system, not because there weren't any'. In contrast, Volk made his personal archive available for my research. Drawing on the only material I have, I have to pursue the following section of the story using only Volk's sources. Accordingly, Volk's response to BBC Films is best understood in terms of precariousness and the unequal power relations inherent in freelance creative industries work.

If BBC Films raised the Florence character as a problem, Volk needed to respond, and to respond positively. Otherwise the project could stall again (with, at this point, eleven years gestation from the original treatment), or he could be removed. As screenwriter Tony Grisoni has noted, during the development process, 'you can be dropped out like a spare part of a machine, and replaced by a different cog'.[37] Similarly, Volk reflects that even when other practitioners have a different vision for the script, 'the best thing you can do sometimes is go with it as far as you can. That's why the development process on lots of films is so torturous and fraught for the writer'. In his notes to Rubin and Oppenheimer, he breaks down their issues of characterisation into four areas: empathy and relatability, the (lack of) modernity in Florence (in relation to language), the clarity of her as a character and the need to make her more 'remarkable'.[38] These are fairly indistinctive points of feedback. Empathy definitely involves relatability (and is in fact an essential condition of it), the lack of modernity makes little sense for a film set in the Victorian period. In turn, 'clarity' is (somewhat incongruously) vague – Florence's character is made very clear in the draft screenplay, it is the lack of empathy that is the issue. Finally, the sense of making her 'more remarkable' makes little sense: as a Cambridge-educated female scientist, shaping her own career as a ghost hunter in Victorian society, she is already rather unique.

Nonetheless, in his response Volk carefully defends his writing, while at the same time offering sensible solutions for each point. For example, regarding the BBC Film's lack of empathy for Florence, he admits he is 'not sure why', noting 'I find her interesting, provocative and multi-layered'. But then he offers a concrete solution: 'what if we drop the marriage and drop the husband?'. He works through each of the four queries in this fashion; he then maps out a new narrative over three pages, highlighting new material where Florence can be seen to empathise with the schoolboys and bringing in a potential romance between Florence and the teacher. This is a practical response from a professional screenwriter,

demonstrating Volk's awareness of the need to build strong, cooperative relationships with producers, not only because of the potential to be replaced, but also for future work. As David Hesmondalgh and Sarah Baker have noted, in the television industry, 'good working relations' play an important role in careers, with the ensuing implications that workers suppress 'anger and frustration in the name of good working relations'.[39] There is a definite mirroring of this process in film. Volk may disagree with many of the proposals, however if he (or his script) is to continue in the development process, he must adapt to suit the visions of others – particularly those with the money and power to realise the production.

Despite making these amendments, a further year passed without securing a director, and in 2008 David Thompson left his role as Head of BBC Films and founded Origin Pictures, taking Rubin and *The Interpretation of Ghosts* with him in the process. The screenplay was chosen as it was considered ready for a director and did not already have another independent producer attached to the project. Origin then approached James Watkins, who at that point had directed and written *Eden Lake* (2008) and written *My Little Eye* (2002, Marc Evans) and *Gone* (2007, Ringan Ledwidge) as well as the then forthcoming *The Descent Part 2* (2009, Jon Harris). The fit between director and project is clear: *Eden Lake* was considered a success, described by the *Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw as 'the best British horror film in years: nasty, scary and tight as a drum'.[40] In addition, Watkins had already demonstrated his horror knowledge and experience with his prior screenwriting projects. The suitability is confirmed further in interview, when Watkins revealed he is a 'huge fan' of horror, and cites *The Innocents* as 'his kind' of horror film, a sentiment that is somewhat at odds with the relentless violence and nastiness of his initial projects. This, however, may say more about the type of British horror film that was going into production in the early 2000s, rather than personal preference.[41] *The Interpretation of Ghosts* appealed to Watkins as he was looking for 'an interesting British ghost story', and he was drawn to the school setting, 'the

notion of grief', 'the debunking of the spiritualism' and how it could become 'an exploration of the supernatural'. Importantly, he saw 'potential for a very strong, interesting, leading woman role'.

Watkins became a major contributor on the project, and although he is not credited, his ideas and vision for the film are evident in the final film. The issue of credit is an interesting one. Watkins revealed that 'I didn't seek a writer's credit because I didn't feel I had made a meaningful contribution to the script', a statement that strikingly contradicts Oppenheimer's assertion that Watkins' rewrite 'was an incredibly important stage'. My research confirms the latter reading and demonstrates, by example, the importance of media industries and screenwriting studies. First, my emphasis on the screenwriter's experience and the development process complicates traditional academic understandings of film authorship (which are predicated almost exclusively upon the creative vision of the director). Second, this research illuminates the highly collaborative nature of film production, particularly where multiple people across several roles may work on a project and yet may choose not to be credited.

Watkins analysed the script and sent his response and suggestions for changes to Volk, who felt that the proposed alterations meant that the script lost 'the setting, the undercurrent of sexual repression, the backstory, the shock ending, and the arc from rational mind (logic) to madness (truth)'.[42] Watkins' suggestions indeed made a profound difference to the script in three main ways. First, Watkins suggested relocating from the 1880s to the 1920s. He explains: 'I thought it was more interesting to have it just after the War' as 'it infuses the story with a weight of loss'. As we will see further on in the development process, the change of period may have disappointed Volk, who preferred the classic Victorian setting, however it proved extremely attractive to the later directors and cast. Second, Volk explains, Watkins felt '(as I think they all secretly did) that there should be a heterosexual relationship at the centre

of the film'. Finally, Watkins suggesting a backstory change. Following the initial meeting with the BBC in 2003, this is the second major backstory change to the script, and impacts significantly on the second half of the film. Watkins wished to introduce Maud, a housekeeper and to make the ghost a young boy, Maud's dead son.

In October 2008, Volk revised the screenplay incorporating all of Watkins suggestions. One of the most notable differences in this version is the distinctive gender shift. Female characters dominated early drafts, but now Florence is a solitary female ghost hunter in a man's world. However, Volk is prosaic about the changes, acknowledging them as normal in the film industry and explaining that directors have to 'find their own way' on the project:

> [directors] have got to make something that they see some worth in, and it becomes personal to them, that's why at the end they always feel like they've done all the work. They have to feel that in order to direct it. And we as writers have to back down and say it's part of the inevitable process that you've got. . . . If [Watkins] didn't feel comfortable making a film about lesbian ghost hunters . . . if he just didn't get it there's no persuasion on earth that I could do to make him make that film.

Volk's analysis resonates with Bridget Conor's finding of 'disinvestment and pride' in her study of London-based screenwriters. According to Conor, the creatives who maintain their livelihoods through writing are required to 'juggle the contrary logistics of the screen production industry', 'logics that call on these workers to take pride in their individual inputs but also be ready and willing to "let go", to disinvest in their projects as they become collectively managed and developed'.[43] This is confirmed by Rubin, who explains 'it will

never happen that you'll give a script to a director and he'll be like "yeah let's shoot it". He'll be working on it until he's taken ownership of it'.

Watkins then contacted Volk directly and 'extremely politely' explained 'I feel I need to do my own draft of my script'. Watkins renamed the script *The Buried*, invented a boyfriend for Florence who had been killed in the war, renamed the teacher Mallory and made him Florence's love interest. Yet again, the unequal power relations become apparent: having first amended the story to suit the producers' interpretation, the screenwriter is then required to first re-envisage their work (here, losing much of the gender relations argument that the original story was predicated upon), then entirely relinquish control of their work, submitting themselves to the director – who in turn needs to work out their version of the story in order to make the film. This is not a critique of Watkins (or indeed, later, of Murphy), who are doing what they need to do to perform their directorial role. At the initial reading stage, the director has to judge whether he or she can 'construct an appropriate and coherent fictional universe from it using images and sound'; the work of reading and analysing is 'critical to establishing the artistic vision that will carry all the way through the production process to the film's completion'.[44] Or, in Oppenheimer's words, 'directors are mostly practical people who go "shit right, can I do this, is it ready for me, more or less?" then they dive in, and you have to toast that'. The director's analysis of the script is thus a high-stakes activity: as the creative force that drives production, the director seriously considers whether he or she can envisage transforming the script into a film. And, if not, what needs to be done to the screenplay to make production possible? Volk was invited to comment on *The Buried* and told Watkins 'I think you've done an immensely clever job of moving it forward in the direction of the film you want as a director. I sense you've made it a more commercial movie'.[45] This article then acknowledges the weighty considerations the director must work through, but wishes to also recognise the impact of these decisions upon the screenwriter, whose perspective is often

absent in histories of horror cinema. This process is more than disinvestment and pride. Story development can be understood as a process of screenwriters' abandonment: they wish to celebrate their script moving towards production, but at the same time their writing (their sole source of power) is removed from them, a necessary submission in order to see their ideas realised on screen.

In his work on screenplay development, Bloore describes an 'over-developed' project as 'subject to so many different opinions and notes that it loses its focus, direction and individuality – or it can lose all momentum as financiers' executives change and leave the project in limbo – a situation known in the business as development hell'.[46] In May 2009 Origin came dangerously close to this situation. Watkins announced he was leaving the project as he had signed up to direct another horror film (later revealed to be *The Woman in Black* [2012]). He explains that 'there was the potential' in *The Woman in Black* to see it through to completion, but with *The Buried* 'I wasn't able to quite find the right solutions'. (Watkins' comment on the difficulty of making the story work is an important one to which I will return in the final section of this article.) Watkins' departure left Origin in a difficult position. They had Volk's latest draft of *The Interpretation of Ghosts* – significantly altered from the original concept following Watkins' notes – which had now been in development for six years, Watkins' new script *The Buried*, no director and a potential financing impasse as Optimum Releasing (now StudioCanal) had been brought on board because of their previous relationship with Watkins from *Eden Lake*. Later that month Origin began to search for a new director, at the same time attempting to keep Optimum involved. This leads us to the final section of the article, the third act when the 'quest' to find a director is achieved: Origin signs Murphy to direct and Rebecca Hall to play Florence. The following analysis then demonstrates how the creative input of these two individuals had a profound impact upon the final script and Florence's characterisation.

Act Three: 'A Game of Hero-Worship'

After reading *The Buried* and *The Interpretation of Ghosts*, Murphy met with Origin, BBC Films (who remained a production partner) and Optimum Releasing. He went in aggressively, critiquing the scripts and demanding, '*look*, what you want to do is . . . to pick this up by the balls'. He then pitched his central concept: '*Why* do we see ghosts?'. He demanded 'if I'm allowed to make this film I want to rewrite it and make it about the *why*, not just the fact that we do'. Murphy's pitch reinforces the creative power of the (potential) director, and that as the director becomes more involved, the screenwriter becomes proportionally less valuable, particularly if the director has writing experience (like Watkins, Murphy had successful screen credits, writing factual and fictional television scripts). Notably, Volk was only contacted after Murphy was hired and had rewritten the script. Murphy's self-assurance and charisma in the meeting were calculated to win over industry professionals, whom he believed were looking for a new way forward on the project. Volk confirms that Murphy is 'the kind of director that producers love', he 'comes in and says I know how to make this film. Which is what they want to hear'. Murphy is very self-aware, and jovially admits he pitched himself as 'a bit full of myself, really'. This is because filmmaking works on 'a very strange process of confidence':

> It's confidence for an industry that doesn't have the courage of its own convictions so often a very decent script . . . can wallow around in the dust until someone who is perceived to have a touch of success picks it up or is approached. So the process of trying to get a project off the ground is in part the producers wanting to find someone that they think can do a good job but to a very large part to do with finding somebody that they feel would give the financiers confidence.

Much of this confidence comes from the producers' or financiers' ability to look at a director's work, and say, according to Murphy, 'he or she can be trusted to, *because* of this, based on this success'. At this point Murphy had not yet won the BAFTA for *Occupation*, but the BBC mini serial had received an internationally positive critical response, the *New York Times* describing it as 'one of the best television depictions yet of [the Iraq] conflict', and the *Los Angeles Times* describing it as 'unexpectedly uplifting in its bravery and humanity'.[47] In Murphy's words, there was a sense in the industry that he had 'caused a bit of a stir'. Origin's decision to approach Murphy also signals a shift in their strategy. Watkins had previously been hired with an outstanding pedigree in horror, yet Murphy's background was factual and had only recently moved into directing television fiction, and freely admits to knowing little about horror. Commenting on this, Rubin describes Murphy as 'smart', with 'slightly leftfield thoughts', and that 'it wouldn't necessarily feel exciting to just go with someone who was just "period ghost stories" to do another one'.

Murphy rewrote the script based on the revised *The Interpretation of Ghosts*, but taking story elements from *The Buried*. The script was retitled *The Awakening* in December 2009 in a joint decision between Origin, Optimum and Murphy. His main focus was rewriting Florence. For Murphy, she was 'an absolute know-all, and without flaw or any vulnerability', and he wanted to make her 'somebody who was cocksure of herself in many ways but deeply flawed and reticent and skittish in others'. As I have already suggested, Florence did need some revision in terms of empathy and flaws, but what Murphy suggests here poses significant gender implications. He clarifies: 'the reality is that [audiences] don't like a film with a know-it-all woman, sadly', and 'you can get away with a wisecracking smart arse (particularly American) *man*, because the audiences forgive that because of natural inherent sexism'. Here, Murphy articulates what others have not realised (or have felt unable to say):

the perception that audiences will not countenance Florence's level of strength and intellectualism. Murphy built in multiple flaws into her character because he felt she needed to be broken in order to be accepted.

In March 2010 Rebecca Hall was cast as Florence. Hall was attracted to the role because she thought 'there is something inherently fun about playing someone who is completely "unrelatable, unlikeable" on the page', but then explains that she didn't really think Florence was those things, rather that 'strong know-it-all women exist and they can be really wonderful, inspiring characters, if you bother to understand them… which we do easily with a male character… because we've got training for it'.[48] Hall's statement both reinforces and problematizes Murphy's reading of audience responses to Florence. It confirms that male characters with very 'strong' character traits are perceived to play well with audiences. At the same time Hall is drawn to Florence's strength and perceives her as relative unique in contemporary screenplays: 'in film, there used to be tropes for that kind of women. Less so now'. Florence is 'the kind of part that once upon a time Kathryn Hepburn would get to play'. There is something sad about Hall's reading of this situation, that to find comparable role models for strong female leads who dominate the men around them, we need to go back over seventy years to the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s.

Murphy and Hall's responses also reveal how much the final stages of development depend not only on predicting audience reactions but also how the gender dynamics of the British film industry can make this a circular and self-fulfilling prophecy. Men dominate development and creative roles, and the only production departments to consistently have a majority of women are make-up, costume and casting. Indeed, in writer and producer Stephen Follows' major survey of filmmaking (published in 2014), 'the majority of key creative roles are overwhelmingly male' and 'the three most significant creative roles (Writer, Producer and Director) have all seen the percentage of women fall in the past twenty years'.[49] In this case,

the (male) director rewrites the (male writers') script (after it has been developed by two men), working on the assumption that audiences will not accept the assertive female protagonist. Yet Hall, the first woman brought on to the project, defends the more assertive characterisation and found a female perspective on the script to be necessary. Indeed, Hall explains that the more Murphy worked on Florence, the more she became 'a game of hero-worship, like it's *Florence Cathcart* and she's this and that'. She describes herself as on 'high alert' for when Murphy 'was looking at her as this sort of fantasy, rather than a real person'. Hall attempted to counter this by asking herself 'how do we make her human? How do we make her vulnerable? How do we make her real?'. Notably, she adds, 'And I'm not saying this as any sort of criticism to Nick, because I don't think he was even conscious of it, he was the first one to try and make her real'.

Murphy and Hall's collaboration brought a new emotional frailty to Florence. We can explore the revisions' effects by comparing the end of the opening séance in the 2008 screenplay with the finished film. As noted at the beginning of this article, Murphy's vision of the séance was very different from Volk's, yet the narrative function remains similar: Florence debunks the spiritualists and in so doing is revealed to be logical, intellectual and brave. The transformation takes place in the moments that follow. In the screenplay, Volk describes Florence alone in the séance room: 'last to go, Florence gives one last long look round the pathetic room with its sad debris of delusion'. [50] Here Volk uses 'pathetic', 'debris' and 'delusion' to communicate the world through Florence's unforgiving eyes. She then goes home and into a confrontation with the schoolteacher.

The film creates a space between these two moments that explores Florence's vulnerability. As soon as the medium is unmasked, Florence's exhilaration rapidly subsides. She slows down and becomes still, her face falls into blankness and her eyes glaze over. She traces Charles' photograph with her fingertip. We realise she wanted to find proof of contact

with the dead. Her despair is reinforced when she returns to her aunt's house. She lacks the energy to raise her hand to shut the door, leaning heavily against it instead. Mallory (Dominic West), explains that his pupils believe their school is haunted. Florence does not lecture or ridicule him. Instead, she raises her eyebrows, signalling incredulity, and opens her mouth to explain – then pauses, looking to the floor. There is a substantial decrease in Florence's dialogue in the film; nearly all her grandstanding speeches and lectures from earlier drafts have been removed. Florence retains the fierce intellect imagined in Volk's drafts, but this quality is depicted through gesture, staging and editing, rather than via dialogue. Hall contributed to this, explaining that 'when I got the script, I remember thinking there's going to be less of this chat . . . in fact, there are a couple of scenes where I said I think I can probably do this without saying words'. According to Hall, scripts are '*always* overwritten prior to going into production because so much of it is being written for the financiers who can't understand subtext or subtleties or what visual references or keys there might be that are telling the story'. This accords with David Mamet's grand statement that 'most movie scripts were written for an audience of studio executives. Such executives do not know how to read movie scripts. Not one of them. . . . A movie script should be a juxtaposition of uninflected shots that tell the story'.[51] It is crucial here to take Mamet's 'executive' to mean Hall's financiers; conversations with Oppenheimer and Rubin demonstrate their clear understanding of visual storytelling, what Murphy rewrites is a script for Optimum, a script that will be radically pruned for actual production.

Finally, there is a significant story issue relating Florence and the themes of grief, loss and homecoming. This is an issue that first emerged in development, is retained in the screenwork and becomes apparent in the scene following the séance. Florence leaves the house and stands in the road. Empty chairs, left out by a removal man, surround her. Murphy explains that the photography repeatedly frames empty chairs next to Florence, intended to

signal a 'vacuum' in Florence's life, which, the audience believes at this point, relates to Charles. Charles was invented to make Florence more empathetic: her ghost-hunting career emerges from her need to connect with her lost love. Yet the second half of the film is thematically beholden to Volk's original idea around *The Innocents*, in which Flora/ence returns to Bly/the school and confronts the ghosts of her past. The difficulties in reconciling these opposing halves was apparent to the various writers on the project. Volk concurs that 'the first half is the most like my original script and intention, i.e. the set up and the first night and the camera tripwires', but the second half is different due to the new story involving Maud and Tom. Watkins admits he had always enjoyed the set-up but found the backstory reveal problematic; he failed to develop the second half 'to a sense where I felt that all the elements were all cohering'. In turn, Murphy speaks candidly: 'I think I realised too late that the theme of the film and this notion of loss and grief and the hole in someone's heart . . . was a difficult tie-in with the idea of [the school] being her home. . . . I realised too late that that needed to be wound into the ending'. In essence, the story of the development of *The Awakening* becomes a return to *The Innocents*, a film that has insistently haunted *The Awakening* from its inception. Despite Oppenheimer insisting that BBC Films would have been 'a hostage to fortune' in developing Volk's original idea, strong traces of it remain, complicating the second half of the finished film. This was reflected in the critical reception, which suggested 'the second half contains 'a ridiculous revelation and a redundant sexual assault' (*Time Out*), 'the final colossal revelation [is] contrived' *(Guardian)* and 'the resolution may leave you a little unsatisfied and even confused. . . . Perhaps this needs to be seen several times to fully understand the last 20 minutes' (*San Francisco Chronicle*).[52]

Conclusion

Reflecting upon the film, Volk reveals that 'people ask, do you think [the script] got better? It didn't become better or worse. It just became something different. And it's very difficult to explain to people'. Given the findings of this article, Volk's difficulty is understandable. Fifteen years in the making, *The Awakening* has been privy to a prodigious range of creative voices and ideas: numerous treatments, a sole producer, a creative development production team, multiple drafts, two production companies, further drafts, endless notes, one director's complete rewrite and a second rewrite from another as well as subsequent input from actors. In 'Para-Industry, Shadow Academy', John Caldwell argues that 'the collective, negotiated nature of all productions means that multivalent, polyvocality is a fundamental industrial condition'.[53] Yet in a field defined by collaboration, this research goes against the grain by demarcating the individual voices of directors, producers, writers and actors in order to better understand not only their contributions to story and character development, but also their influence upon the screenwork.

I have also attempted to give a more prominent voice to screenwriters, who often fare badly in industry hierarchies of power. These findings are not unique to *The Awakening*, or to the horror genre. Writer Alec McAulay has reflected upon his experience of film development and is left with 'the hunch that one authored a better version of the film than that seen on screen', and that this hunch is a somewhat 'Pyrrhic victory reserved for screenwriters, and one little explored'.[54] Conor has pointed out that while playwrights 'are involved and visible in the whole lifecycle of a theatrical production process' and novelists 'exercise a large amount' of 'named and visible creative autonomy', screenwriters are often barred from film sets and production processes, 'viewed as blueprint generators, or in extreme cases, formula-driven "hacks"'.[55] While the interviews with producers and directors have not discussed Volk in these (extreme) terms, they nonetheless suggest that the screenwriter is only really useful until the director (soon to become writer-director) signs on to the project. From that point forward,

the script becomes a crystallisation of the transfer of ownership from one creative individual to another.

My methodology, which draws upon interviews, memory work, screenwriting studies, production studies and film history, attempts to create a viable approach (and to produce further interest in) development in contemporary filmmaking. It could be invaluable for rethinking the way we approach histories of horror film. To date, the majority of academic analyses have explored film through textual analysis, or through institutional contexts such as exhibition and technologies of distribution. This research takes issue with not only the focus on the screenwork and its cultural afterlife, but also with the types of film that dominate our horror histories. In examining *The Awakening*, I have been able to draw parallels in the troubling perception of female protagonists, both inside the academy and industry. As noted earlier, much of the academic work on horror has focused on Hammer or its likeminded offspring, where women are frequently victims. This work is part of a concerted effort to illuminate strong female leads in horror film, and, following Hutchings' recent work on *The Descent*, to begin to map an alternative history where they are brought into prominence in the post-2000s British horror revival.[56] In an industry where men fill nearly all creative roles, there appears to be an anxiety around audience perceptions of dominant female characters, and a reluctance to develop difficult and complex female protagonists in a way that is not necessarily problematic for male characters. It is hoped that my findings illuminate this problem and offer a moment of reflection for academic historians and industry practitioners alike.

Acknowledgements

Notes

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